

# Fred Wada: Man of Moxie

Wada and wife Masako at Nisei Week parade.



California First Bank director Fred Wada has packed a lot of living into 72 years. And he's done it with style, gusto and moxie. Wada is a successful businessman (supermarkets, export-import trade), a leading philanthropist in Los Angeles' Japanese-American community and a former member of the LA Harbor Commission. He's also an important figure on the worldwide Olympics scene. Wada has rubbed shoulders with the late John Wayne and noses with Eskimos in an Arctic igloo. He was presented to Emperor Hirohito when the Japanese sovereign visited California four years ago. Two major governments, Mexico and Japan, have given him awards and the City of Tokyo has named him an honorary citizen for his Olympics efforts. A sportsman addict, Wada has traveled to every first class fishing grounds on the globe. He's fished for trout in New Zealand, salmon in Scotland, maulin in the Bahamas, golden dorado on the Amazon River and char in the Arctic. He once spent the night in an Arctic igloo when the wings of his small plane iced over. Wada is a born fighter. He likes to speak his mind, in the boardroom as well as on the deck of a fishing boat, and frequently peppers his conversation with salty language. Although Wada chain-smokes and admits to

getting little exercise besides casting for fish, his health is excellent. Fifteen years ago, doctors discovered Wada had cancer of the stomach and he was booked into LA's Good Samaritan Hospital. There he met John Wayne, who was also having his first bout with cancer. Wada's surgery proved successful and he determined to "live every day of my life to the fullest." Although Wada says he is semi-retired, he's as active as a man half his age. At least three times a week, Wada drives from his home on Huntington Park to check on the last of his 17 South Van Ness Avenue in LA to neighboring supermarkets. He sold the rest over the years to devote more time to his family, community activities and, of course, fishing. Wada also keeps a close eye on his import-export affairs. A California First director since 1971, he often calls at bank offices throughout the LA area and currently is trying to help the bank increase trust business. Wada is a frequent visitor to a hospital and three retirement homes for Japanese-Americans which have been established in LA primarily through his efforts. Wada was so concerned about adequate shelter and care for the aged that he put up his own home as collateral to get a bank loan for the first nursing home. In recognition of his lifetime of service to the Japanese-American community, Wada was named grand marshal of the 1979 Nisei Week

parade in LA. (See parade photos on page 11.) Wada no longer is a member of the LA Harbor Commission—ex-Mayor Sam Yorty gave him a plaque for his service, which included a key role in arranging trade agreements with six major Japanese cities—but he is still very active in Olympic circles. Wada was instrumental in getting the Olympic Games for Tokyo in 1964 and Mexico City in 1968. After 12 years of intensive lobbying, he and other LA leaders were successful in having the City of Angels named as site of the 1984 games. Wada also is a member of the Organizing Committee for the '84 Olympics. Wada believes that "athletics create goodwill between peoples and nations" and he has been an active sports backer for 30 years. It all started when he hosted two Japanese swimmers at his LA home in 1949. He became involved in Olympics activities in the 1950s and almost single-handedly raised money for the Japanese Village at the 1962 Winter Olympics at California's Squaw Valley. Wada, who was born to immigrant parents in Bellingham, Wash., has never allowed adversity to get him down. Wada's mother died when he was young and he spent the next half dozen years in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, returning to the West Coast at the age of 12. He was forced to leave school at 14 and went to work for a grocer. By the age of 27, he had his own chain of grocery stores in Oakland. Later, he moved his base of operations to Southern California. World War II spelled hard times for many Japanese-Americans in California, as the federal government decreed that they must leave California voluntarily or be placed in detention camps. Wada refused to be pessimistic about his status. With characteristic style and determination, he called on the governor of Utah and offered to head a group of 130 Japanese-Americans to help farm unused acreage in the Mormon state. The governor accepted. Later, the federal government asked Wada to travel to California detention camps to urge other Japanese-Americans to work on farms. After the war, Wada returned to the LA area to start the most productive phase of his life, both in business and community endeavors. During the past three decades, Wada has been showered with honors and awards for his public achievements. But that tells only half the tale. Jack Iwata, LA correspondent for Japan's Kyodo News Service and a long-time friend of Wada, tells the other half. "Fred has helped many people and done much good that no one will ever know about. That's because he doesn't blow his own horn."